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Proposed joint research on ethnicity in Botswana
a programme to be undertaken by the National Institute of Development Research and Documentation, University of Botswana, and the African Studies Centre, Leiden University, The Netherlands[1]

Ethnicity in Botswana

One of the inspirations for the present proposal consists in the extensive research carried out in Francistown, Botswana, by the African Studies Centre, Leiden, in association with the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing, Republic of Botswana, since 1988. Francistown turned out to be strategically placed from a point of view of ethnicity studies, since this rapidly growing town (with 60,000 inhabitants the second largest town in the country) finds itself in the centre of a region which is inhabited by Botswana's largest and most vocal ethnic minority, the Kalanga. The town is also the cradle of some of the country's major opposition parties (those which have a strong Kalanga base), and of a relatively large number of African Independent churches, which here (in a region which from the late 19th century had been adminstered by the White-controlled Tati Company instead of by chiefs) found a freedom from chiefly control and therefore also a sanctuary from the ethnic particularism associated with any chief. The ethnic composition of Francistown, and its effect on the economic, political, social, linguistic, judicial and religious scene, are discussed with greater or lesser detail in a number of publications springing from the earlier project

More in general, however, there is a remarkable paucity of publications specifically on ethnicity in Botswana.

At first sight this stands to reason. A country that is called 'Land of the Tswana people' (the literal meaning of the Tswana word 'Botswana'), and that boasts Tswana, in addition to English, as its national language, could effectively pose as an ethnic monolith. This is how Botswana is actually perceived, not only by its ruling elite (who overwhelmingly identify as Tswana themselves) and in their official pronouncements made on behalf of the Botswana state, but also by researchers both inside the country and internationally.

On closer analysis, however, there are a number of contexts in which this monolithic capacity of ethnicity in Botswana needs to be problematized.

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[1] This proposal was written at the request of, and after extensive consultations with, Professor A. Datta, Director, National Institute of Development Research and Documentation, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana, in October 1992. An earlier form of this proposal was presented and — at the departmental level — formally approved in the meeting of the department of political and historical studies, African Studies Centre, Leiden, 14 December 1992. The present text was updated in April, 1994.

1. Intra-Tswana divisions.

Schapera, the doyen of Botswana studies, has repeatedly discussed (Schapera 1952, 1984) the 'tribal' composition of the Tswana groups in Botswana, defining the territorial organization and historical background of the major groups. These are the notorious 'eight tribes' whose names, in alphabetical order, have found their way into the Botswana constitution:

> 'The ex-officio Members of the House of Chiefs shall be such persons as are for the time being performing the functions of the office of Chief in respect of the BaKgatla, Bakwena, Bamalete, Bamangwato, Bangwaketse, Barolong, Batawana and Batlokwa Tribes, respectively.' (Botswana Constitution, ch. 78)[2]

Especially Schapera's monograph on *Ethnic composition of the Botswana tribes* (1952) goes into great detail with regard to the internal divisions within the Kgatla, Kwena, Lete, Ngwato, Ngwaketse, Rolong, Tawana and Tlokwa. There, other ethnic groups do not receive treatment in their own right but appear as ethnic elements subsumed under Tswana territorial chiefs of any of the eight designations: especially those non-Tswana whom Tswana-speakers call *Sarwa* (i.e. *Que* in the latter group's now preferred own nomenclature, or *San* in an established academic nomenclature, or *Bushmen* in a now discarded White ethnocentric nomenclature), as well as Kgalakgadi and Kalanga. Writing long before the time that ethnic studies had exploded the classic tribal model in anthropology, Schapera (1952) offers little more than an elaborate ethnic taxonomy on historical principles. What in the light of later literature would be obvious questions are of course not posed at this stage, for instance:

— How does the *boundary definition* between these intra-Tswana groups come about in the social, political, economic, political and judicial process? To what extent is such boundary definition *situational, disputed, and changeable over time?*

— does an implied *hierarchy* underlie these apparently co-ordinative (horizontal) ethnic divisions, and if so (as is usually the case in any ethnic field) how is that reflected both in social interaction between their members (settlement patterns, marriage structures, access to scarce ecological resources — especially land) and differential recognition by, and access to, the central state of these groups and their senior representatives?

— To what extent do the ethnic distinctions coincide not only with geographical distribution, but also with *ecological specialization* within the territory of Botswana?

— In ways which still require much further research to elucidate, these historic ethnic divisions among the Tswana-speakers in Botswana are still relevant in the sphere of neo-traditional politics (chiefs, House of Chiefs, customary courts, and to some extent the Land Boards which allocate *land* and therefore hold the key to rural development and rural elite involvement); the enshrining of these ethnic divisions (ignoring other similar divisions, involving non-Tswana speakers) in the Independence Constitution of Botswana already points to the *comparatively close links that exist in this country between neo-traditional politics and the post-colonial state. What is the nature of*

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2   This is the only mention of 'the eight tribes' in the Botswana Constitution, and exclusively for the very specific purpose of defining the membership of the House of CHiefs (a neo-traditional advisory body to the Government, complementary to Parliament). However, non-Tswana ethnic activiists in the country read this passage as denying minority rights, or even the right to exist, to other non-Tswana groups.

these links? What explains their exceptional characteristics as compared to other African countries?

— How does intra-Tswana ethnicity define *differential access to modern state resources?* How does it inform modern *party politics* in this country which is often cited as a rare example of consistent multi-partyism ever since its attainment of Independence? Most of the parties active on the Botswana scene have been recognized to carry ethnic overtones: Botswana Democratic Party (in power since before Independence, which was obtained in 1966) has a strong link with the Ngwato; its founding President, Sir Seretse Khama, was Botswana's first national President, as well as the heir apparent to the Ngwato Paramountcy. The Botswana National Front, the major opposition party which for years has controlled the City Council of the national capital Gaborone, has strong Ngwaketse tendencies. The numerically insignificant Botswana Independence Party has mainly Tawana support, while the Botswana Democratic Union as well as the Botswana People's Party had a strong base among the Kalanga people who, while nominally Ngwato for the simple reason of living within the Ngwato administrative boundaries, constitute the largest and most vocal ethnic group outside the Tswana cluster ; also, the Kalanga ethnic group inside Botswana is larger than any of the constituent groups within the Tswana cluster. While these correspondences can hardly be overlooked by any casual student of Botswana post-Independence politics, and have received some passing attention in the literature, they have not yet been subjected to systematic study by political scientists.

— In addition to the study of formal political structures, ethnicity in African countries has been recognized to create *particularistic, informal networks of appropriation and distribution of such resources as are controlled by or via the state.* The functioning of intra-Tswana divisions in this context remains to be studied.

— Botswana is not the only political unit in the Southern African region which seeks to base its stability and integration on a publicly proclaimed Tswana identity: the same would apply to that creation of the apartheid state, Bophutotswana. The news media from that bantustan are widely received in Botswana, and have a considerable impact on modern urban culture. *What other effects does the closeness of South Africa, and particularly of a Tswana bantustan, have on Tswana ethnicity in Botswana itself?*

— International dimensions of Botswana ethnicity can also be studied with regard to some of the non-Tswana groups which are not confined to the Botswana national territory, notably the Kalanga (also found in Zimbabwe), Herero (also in Namibia), Que (also in Namibia and South Africa), Ndebele (also in Zimbabwe and — since recently — Zambia), Afrikaanders (all over Southern Africa but particularly in South Africa), and English (all ovef Southern Africa). Let us therefore now turn to a discussion of the non-Tswana ethnic groups in Botswana.

2. The Kalanga

As a relatively large ethnic group straddling the Botswana/Zimbabwe border, as speakers of a language which, as a form of western Shona is not mutually intelligible with the Tswana (= western Sotho) language, as political, cultural and (via the cult of the High God Mwali) religious heirs to the impressive state systems centring on the Zimbabwe plateau since the beginning of the present millennium, the Kalanga have been relatively well studied, but until recently little attention has been paid to their inter-ethnic relations with the Tswana within the national state of Botswana (Picard 1987; Masale 1985; van Binsbergen 1994). With their own traditional rulers reduced to sub-chiefs (*kgosana*) under Ngwato overlords since the mid-19th century (with a

particularly traumatic period under the regency of Seretse's paternal uncle Tshekedi), Kalanga ethnic activists perceive their own identity primarily in antagonism to the Ngwato. Ecologically much of *Bukalaka* (a Tswana name meaning 'Kalanga-land') used to allow for arable crops, by contrast to the more exclusive emphasis on livestock among the Tswana-speaking groups. Greater access to mission and hence education, and the ethnic access to the Zimbabwean hinterland, also created inequalities between the Tswana and the Kalanga. Meanwhile we have to realize that Tswana-speakers, in the form of Khurutshe of the Mpofu (Eland) totem), have lived in northeastern Botswana from the early nineteenth century at least, while Kalanga (using, or not using, the Kalanga language) have for a comparable period had their own wards in Ngwato capitals; the hardening of ethnic distinctions appears a matter of the twentieth century and an assessment of ethnic relations in the pre-colonial period may reveal little in the way of entrtenched historical antagonism. The contemporary Kalanga situation is characterized by an interesting dilemma: while some opt for a militant assertion of Kalangahood in the face of the Tswana (particularly Ngwato) who have appropriated the post-Independence Botswana state, others (probably a majority, and including many members of the rising Botswana middle class) limit expressions of Kalangahood to private situations, and in the public sphere exchange submission to Tswana domination for personal political and economic success.

3. Peripheral groups in the north-west

Such groups as Ndebele, Subiya, Humbukushu and Yei, whose languages are much closer to Zimbabwean and Zambian languages than to Tswana, have been little studied from a sociological and political science perspective. They are mainly administered as part of the Tawana en Ngwato neo-traditional organization. A case apart, and relatively well studied, is that of the Herero, who fled into Botswana in response to the German colonial government of what is now Namibia, in the early years of the twentieth century. For all these ethnic groups in Botswana we have little information as to their internal ethnic processes and their functioning under Tswana ethnic hegemony.

4. Client groups in the arid fringes

By contrast, there is a vast literature on the Que (Bushmen), produced by an international community of anthropologists, who however tended to see their research participants more as specimens of 'primitive man' (of the hunting and collecting 'variety') then as participants in a contemporary, ethnic network of economic, political and social relationships. The implied social and economic subordination of the Que, the increasing ecological pressure on their territory and their being relegated to squatters and grossly underpaid farmhands serving (under conditions of constant and blatant humiliation including sexual harassment) the livestock interests of Tswana-speaking absentee farmers, have however been recognized in an increasing number of studies. In some of these, the Que appear under a new euphemism as Remote Area Dwellers ('RADs'), — with obvious possibilities of punning on the name of a well-known small rodent, and, more importantly, with an attempt to dissimulate any suggestion of ethnic identity (characterizing them in terms of their habitat's remoteness to the implied centre, rather than as an ethnic group). Much of this also applies to the Kgalakgadi, who while speaking a (rather peripheral) Tswana

dialect as distinct from the Khoi-San languages of the Que, socially and economically tend to occupy a similar position of inferiority. In recent years the Que are becoming far more vocal, and in combination with the increasing attention to inter-ethnic subjugation in the recent scholarly studies this has led, in 1992, to a government moratorium (in practice: ban) on RAD research by foreigners. Such an infringement of research liberties is unique in the otherwise extremely liberal and accommodating research climate of Botswana, and signifies that here major elite interests and ethnic conflicts in general are at stake, which would make ethnic research all the more timely. (Wilmsen 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991)

5. Non-Africans

Although the colonial state had a rather reticent and indirect presence in Botswana, especially at the end of the nineteenth century the territory appeared an attractive prize for White prospectors and settlers. Major places of White settlement in the context of commercial farming were the Tuli Block, Ghanzi, and the Tati company lands around Francistown. Francistown was created, in that period, as a gold-mining town, and despite a dramatic decline of mining in the 1910s, the town remained, as a railway head, a centre of retail trade and (through its airport) as a place of transition for South Central African labour migrants heading for the Witwatersrand, a basically White-dominated town until Independence; Africans there very rarely held title to the land they lived on. A similar situation obtained in Lobatse. A trickle of Indian families came to swell the ranks of local traders, often very successfully adapting to local conditions — e.g. Francistown's business community is now largely Indian and has furnished the town major since 1987. White missionaries came and (if Protestants) brought their families, and in the post-Independent period of diamond mining, meat industry, and general economic growth, there was a considerable influx of miners, artisans and technicians from South Africa and European countries (e.g. Italy), as well as development workers (including teachers) from throughout the North Atlantic, particularly Scandinavia. To a considerable extent, White-Black inter-ethnic relations in Botswana appear to have been informed by apartheid models in neighbouring South Africa (with which the country forms a customs union and has very open contact, despite being a Front-line State; and of course thousands of Batswana have first-hand experience of South Africa as labour migrants); but at the same time there are close social, cultural and marital associations between the Botswana elite and the development expatriates.

Most of the history and sociology of non-Africans in Botswana remains to be written. A rare contribution, also in terms of quality, is Mazonde's Manchester Ph.D. on White farming families in the Tuli block, which shows awareness of ethnic dimensions; its revision for publication was partly undertaken during a research fellowship with the ASC, 1990.

Ethnicity in Botswana: themes for research

Against the descriptive background outlined in the previous section, there are a number of systematic reasons why research into ethnicity in Botswana should be both exciting and opportune.

First as an exercise in ethnic theory. The successful impression management which has presented Botswana as an ethnic monolith to the outside world including

academia, has largely postponed the study of ethnicity in Botswana to a point where, with the present boom in ethnic studies all over the world, that country now constitutes *an interesting new testing ground for a number of theoretical issues that are circulating in the international literature.*

There is a regional or continental angle as well. Botswana finds itself in Africa, where the potency of the ethnic phenomenon has been taken for granted since the late nineteenth-century Scramble for that continent, and particularly in Southern Africa, where the powerful neighbour South Africa is undergoing profound transformation precisely in response to a history of some of the most entrenched ethnic conflicts that the world has yet seen. *What is the relevance of general African models ,and of the South Africa transformation, to Botswana? And what is the relevance of Botswana for Africa and for South Africa?*

These questions touch on the rather unique characteristics Botswana has managed to develop in the course of the post-Independence period: a steady economic growth, absence of major internal or external conflicts, at least nominally a consistent multi-partyism, an excellent human rights record, and a publicly cultivated sense of continuity vis-à-vis the nineteenth-century historic heritage which provides additional ideological (neo-traditional) conditions for peace and growth. Of course, this positive record is in itself subject to academic and political myth formation (cf. Picard 1987), and that myth is one of the most powerful tools of self-preservation in the hands of the Tswana-oriented Botswana political and economic elite. But even if the myth is not naïvely reproduced in our academic discourse without further analysis, it does contain a fair amount of truth. Against the prominence of ethnic phenomena throughout Africa and in the Southern African region, one might surmise that the remarkably positive performance of Botswana has much to do with:

— the country's historic ethnic composition,

— the way ethnic processes have been handled by the ruling elite and by politicians in general; and

— the way class formation and major ideological processes such as the spread of mass consumption, mass media, formal education, independent Christianity, and in general a literate peripheral-capitalist culture, in a growth economy, have managed to contain or dissipate divisive ethnic mobilization.

Ethnic research on contemporary Botswana within the proposed project would aim at disentangling these possible connections, in ways which are profoundly relevant for the region and the continent as a whole, and which may well have an even wider theoretical significance.

The topicality of ethnic research in Botswana is moreover suggested not only by the acceleration of ethnic transformations in the wider Southern African region, but also by signs inside the country that the habitual mechanisms of the Botswana state and of the ruling elite to contain ethnic conflict whilst maintaining Tswana (particularly Ngwato) dominance, are beginning to stagnate. The 1980s saw the formation of the country's first and only recognized ethnic minority association, the *Society for the Propagation of the Ikalanga Language* (*SPIL*), — a focus for much resentment on the part of Tswana-oriented politicians. Since the 1989 national elections, which resulted in a further decline of opposition parties with the exception of the BNF, the Union Movement of opposition parties has sought to challenge BDP supremacy but has in itself been hampered by ethnic considerations. BNF, with Gaborone as its stronghold, has occasionally been the focus, or at least the scapegoat, of minor rioting which suggests that the veil of peacefulness (including ethnic peacefulness) in the country begins to be torn. The increasing vocality of the Que, and the ban on foreign research concerning this ethnic group, also suggests mounting tensions in state/Que and Tswana/Que relationships. The slightly declining national

economy (under the effects of global recession as well as recent drought and the end of sanction-busting industry in South Africa's periphery) is likely to make ethnic networks of state appropriation both more vulnerable and more important. At the same time, official pronouncements still maintain the monolithic Tswana illusion for the country as a whole, and thus there is, so far, *a remarkable absence of any public debate concerning the present and future of ethnic relations in Botswana*. Ethnicity research in Botswana, provided it is properly organized and liaised, i.e. tactfully presented as a national and internal undertaking rather than as some foreign meddling in internal conflict and tension, appears to be the best way to bring about such a public national discussion, as a stepping-stone towards prolonged ethnic peace and tolerance in the future.

While the leading questions of the proposed project are thus outlined, it is unlikely that we can answer them by focussing exclusively on one level or one topic. In order to assess the contribution of inter-ethnic (including intra-Tswana) management to post-independence stability and growth, we would need to look both at the national and the regional and local level, and not only among the Tswana-speaking groups but also among the Kalanga, the peripheral groups in the north-west, those in the arid fringes, as well as among the non-Africans.

Format of the proposed project

Even although Botswana is a small country, the above descriptive overview shows that its ethnic situation is so complex that it can only be properly approached by the concerted efforts of a number of researchers, particularly including Botswana nationals who as members of their society bring to the project extensive inside knowledge, language and cultural skills and an awareness of the sensitivities involved which foreign researchers could only hope to build up through an investment of many years — if at all. By a strong reliance on Batwana researchers the project, in addition to its immediate academic yield in the form of publications, will also *contribute to the growth of local research skills*, which is a priority shared by African academics and policy-makers, and agencies of international co-operation in the North, including the Dutch government.

It is proposed that the project take the form of *joint research between the NIR and the ASC*. In such a way the project, undertaken by a national institution, will not be perceived as foreign and will create a context for incisive research into ethnicity in Botswana, at the same time engendering the general social discussion which is urgently needed within Botswana today.

The project is to run for five years.

The respective contributions to the project from ASC, NIR and outside funding bodies is open to further discussion and negotiation. Perhaps the following suggestions may serve as an initial input into that discussion. The ASC is to contribute the working time of one senior researcher of professorial status with a considerable background in Botswana social research, as well as such a part of the ASC research budget as constitutes reasonable and habitual expenditure for one researcher whose main method of data collection is anthropological field-work; this means that research funds for the other researchers in the project will have to be dfound outside the ASC. Further, the ASC is to regularly host conferences or seminars relating to the project, and to accommodate local researchers during conference and write-up periods as the need arises. The NIR will appoint at least one researcher, with a strong preference for a Motswana national, at the MA level, who after an initial period will be entrusted with one section of the project and will write a

Ph.D. thesis on this basis under supervision of the ASC researcher in conjunction with senior Batswana colleagues.Ideally at least two other researchers with M.A. or Ph.D. qualifications will have to be appointed within the project. Since neither the NIR nor the ASC are likely to have the funds available for this, outside funding will have to be sought. Suitable provisions will have to be made for the day-to-day management and overall moniroting of the project, in ways which satisfy both the NIR and ASC, and such outside funding bodies as will contribute to the project.

In Botswana, the project will be have its physical focus at the NIR premises, but of course much of the data collection will take place outside outside Gaborone. It is to be ascertained how much logistic support (housing, secretarial assistance, data analysis etc.) the NIR will be able to furnish in the context of this project.

The division of labour between the various participating researchers will in principle follow the five fields outlines in the above description of the ethnic situation in Botswana:

1. Intra-Tswana divisions
2. The Kalanga
3. Peripheral groups in the north-west
4. Client groups in the arid fringes
5. Non-Africans

However, the division of labour between the various researchers should not be too rigid. Intensive exchange and debate at all stages of the project are essential; for this purpose annual seminars, alternately held in Gaborone and the Netherlands, will be part of the project design.

As main targets of the project (in addition to incidental contributions to learned journals and for less specialized forums) I propose:

1. *Book size reports by each of the researchers*, preferably to be published in Botswana in a joint ASC/NIR series to be created specifically for the purpose. An international editorial board will have to maintain the standards of this series. When applicable, these reports will take the form of *Ph.D. theses* to be defended before the Free University, Amsterdam, where the ASC researcher holds the chair of Third World ethnicity.

2. The *Proceedings of an initial conference on ethnicity in Botswana*, to be held in Gaborone. This conference is to mark the launching of the project and to begin to build a broad societal basis of support and commitment for it, in line with the Botswana social form of legitimacy achieved through consultation.

3. An overall synthetic and theoretical book on the project, to be authored or edited by the project director or directors.

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